

John R. Slack, Comrade
by Tom Sheehan

Dear Londo,

As I said, I found some of Slack's letters in an old duffel bag and it spurred me into looking for him all the more. No trace yet. I hooked up with a woman reporter in Albany who turned me over to a detective who jumped with the 101st in Korea. He sent a black and white car out to 17 Van Schoick Ave within an hour to check out the tenants. Nothing.

I sent letters to a dozen addresses on the street. Nobody in over thirty years has heard of Slack. He's not on any casualty list. The detective says, "If he's on this side of the grass, Tom, we'll find him." But nothing yet. Now my wife Beth understands my search for Jack, (RA Serial No. 12370942) whom I have been looking for for years. I have the detective and TV people and newspaper people as stringers on the job. No news yet.

On my computer, when calls were free, I called 151 John R. Slacks in the country (listed on Yahoo) and have not found him yet. Still no Jack Slack. Jack, as you remember, was my replacement in Korea. "So I could get out of there," as Col Yung Oak Kim put it. One of the great, great kids I think of all the time, along with you and Kujawski and Breda and Mitman and Leone in the 17th and the 49th Field Artillery. I've even called a lot of the neighbors in his old neighborhood and just about all of them are fairly new in the area. I might, if I can find it, append one of my computer-free calls that I did checking out those 151 John Slacks. I think it would interest you, if I can find it, if we had some ham we could have some ham and eggs if we had some eggs. Yuh. Londo, here it is: Here's a morsel for you, from one of my free calls done on the computer looking for Jack.

Got a woman answering the phone, someplace out West during a host of random calls, and follows the conversation and what went with it:

"Ma'am, I'm calling from Boston and I'm looking for a John R. Slack who served in Korea in 1951."

Great noise, exuberance, yelling to her husband: "Daddy, daddy, there's one of the guys from Korea on the phone."

Chair-moving sounds in the background, the sound of a book dropping on the floor, some other unintelligible menial and muffled racket. I thought of a walker in use, crutches, a cane, had awful pictures in the back of my head.

He comes on: "Slack." The voice hard and steady and not like the pictures I had in my mind.

"John R. Slack?"

"Yup"

"You in Korea in '51?"

"Yup."

"You there in '52, too?"

"Yup."

"You in the 31st Regiment?"

"Hell, no. I was in the Marines."

"Oh, shit. I thought I had you."

Lots of noise on the other end, part of a hacking cough. "Hey, Mary, whaddya think of this sonofabitch! Here I've been telling you for forty-five years of married life that there's only one of me in the whole world, and now this strange sonofabitch from out of nowhere is trying to tell me that there is two of me."

We talked a good thirty minutes on the phone, at times hilarious, at times sad, some old pals really missing, and on parting he said, "I hope you find your pal, Tom, and let me know if he's as good lookin' as me."

As one newspaperwoman, hearing the story, said to me, "It's not always the destination, is it?" She's a great help but can't get an assignment out of her editor because "that war" is old news, I guess.

Here's a few lines from Jack's letters. They'll bring you back:

Kap Yong, Korea 8 March 1952—Well, pal, I guess you are probably home now living like a king, so have a few beers on me. Bong Ha gave us your letter when you left, number one, boysan. Well, Breda and Londo left about a week ago and are probably someplace between Sasebo and Frisco at this writing. Walker and Dan are running the two sections now and I am now a first gunner in a bazooka team.

Kumhwa, North Korea 10 August 1952—Be good to yourself as I wouldn't want nothing to happen to somebody what was an old Polar Bear. Like I can tell you, I watch guys come in green and either shape up or go home by the pine box express so I'm qualified to say that you and Londo was a pair of the greatest. From a buddy, RA 12 370 942

PS: Will send you new address from next station. Pick any number from 1-10 and if I'm not there you can be damn sure Gatti is. Drunk or sober, he's an RA and another of the famous Polar Bear pack.

Jeezuz, Londo, I'd love for us to get together with him. Can you imagine the banter and the shit we could throw at each other. I sure hope you can come up with some kind of an address that will throw a clue our way. I just have great difficulty in saying how I truly felt when I saw Breda and Kujawski.. a whole and viable piece of my life coming back at me, a good piece, a memorable piece, such good pals and comrades that even my high school and college teammates don't even begin to measure up against them.

Your buddy and pal forever,

Tom